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ABSTRACT

Although the role of a superintendent has commonly involved a conflict between instructional leadership and business management, this dichotomy is apparently false; superintendents can effectively fill both roles. To explore this possible harmony of roles, one superintendent was studied who by reputation filled both roles very well. The superintendent was observed for 10 days; persons frequently in touch with him were interviewed; and documents recording his work were analyzed. The data were arranged according to categories of responsibility common to most superintendents, so that his practices could be compared to those of other administrators. The successful superintendent was found to maintain consistent practices in delegating responsibilities, in encouraging teamwork, and in facilitating communication among staff. Moreover, his educational goals were consistent and clear, in the areas of individualized learning, racial and sexual equity, and programming for exceptional children. Besides his own clarity and consistency, he influenced other administrators to adopt the same working style. (JW)

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The Values Guiding the Operational
Practices of a Suburban Superintendent

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The Values Guiding the Operational
Practices of a Suburban Superintendent

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The Values Guiding the Operational Practices of a
Suburban Superintendent

(a) Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to describe a recent ethnographic study of a superintendent whose professional reputation among peers is one of outstanding effectiveness in providing leadership for the instructional program and the resource management of the district. The study explores this dual nature of the role of the superintendent with the assumption that it is possible to fulfill both aspects.

Specifically, this paper will describe the study of a suburban superintendent which utilized interviews, observation and document analysis to understand practices used by the superintendent in meeting selected role responsibilities. The superintendent was studied to determine the following:

1. What values guided the practices used by the superintendent in fulfilling role responsibilities?
2. Which, if any, of these values and practices were organizational norms as demonstrated by routine behavior of other administrators in the district?

(b) Perspective

This study was conducted to determine the impact of the superintendent's educational values on the administrative behavior of others and ultimately on the instructional program of the school district. An assumption of the study is that the role of superintendent is one with significant potential to influence instructional program through other administrators. A second assumption is that clarity of professional values is related to role effectiveness.

The literature on the superintendent was studied as it described demographic, work activities, and political information and knowledge. The framework of role theory and thus, social systems theory, as developed by Getzels and Guba (1957) was the analytic structure used. Building on the descriptions of administrative behaviors used by Knezovich (1971) and Mintzberg (1973) a scheme was designed for analysis of routine practices used by the superintendent. Analysis of these practices provided identification of the educational values underlying the role responsibility fulfillment.

(c) Methods

The study was an eight week study using field study methodology. The superintendent was observed for 10 days. The superintendent, central office administrators and staff, building

administrators, classroom teachers, board of education members, advisory committee members, parents active in the schools and political figures in the community were interviewed. Documents concerning goals, finance, budget, special issues, routine communications and board meetings were analysed.

The purpose of these methods was to identify those practices consistently used by the superintendent in role fulfillment and by such identification discover the educational values which caused the practices to be used.

(d) Data Source

The study required identification of a site where instructional programs were a high priority for the superintendent's decision making activities. A nominating panel of 20 persons was developed representing the state department of education, leaders of state professional educational organizations and chairpersons of departments of educational administration in state universities. Through telephone contact they named superintendents in the state who were strong instructional leaders in their districts. Five superintendents received nominations from two or more members of each group. All five were contacted by telephone and responded similarly to questions concerning role responsibility. The one with the most nominations was selected for study. He had been the superintendent of a 6000 student suburban district for 17 years.

(e) Findings

The superintendent had led the district in identifying four instructional program priorities and when decisions were made these priorities were non negotiable. Processes for achieving them were, but the program priorities were fixed. Equity in both programs and practices was used for evaluation of success. A third value was that of wide ownership of programs, achieved through delegation, teaming and extensive communication. Quality assurance through maximum local control was a important value as was full and honest sharing of information. It was evident that these values and the practices used by the superintendent to implement them had become routine in the behaviors of the other administrators in the district.

(f) Importance of the study

The study confirms the assumption that the role of the superintendent has significant potential to directly influence the instructional program of the district. It suggests that superintendents need not view their responsibilities as incompatible choices between instructional leadership or resource management. Secondly, the modeling impact of the superintendent on administrators in the school district is great and is one of the ways in which values permeate the decisional process.

The findings suggest the importance of examining both the formal training programs and the patterns of professional experience typically found in superintendents as they affect the development of professional values. Clarity of values appears to be related to effective leadership.

The role of the superintendent has been studied from varied perspectives. The role emerged from the political reform movement of the turn of the century (Callahan, 1972; Tyack, 1974) in an effort to insulate schools from local politics. Varied groups held varied expectations in terms of priority of responsibilities but the broad categories of educational leader and business manager encompassed most expectations. Griffiths (1966) described the role as ambiguous from the outset while Callahan (1972) concluded that the ambiguity had been resolved in favor of the business resource manager responsibility.

It is possible that the dichotomy is false and that superintendents can fulfill both roles.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate a superintendent who, by reputation, fulfilled both roles effectively. An assumption was that the leadership influence on a school system is great and therefore the values and practices of that leader could be organizational norms during the leader's tenure. A second assumption was that clear values were, in a way as yet unknown, related to effectiveness.

Theoretical and Research Background

Role theory, as it emerges from social systems theory,

served as the conceptual framework for the study. Social systems theory (Getzels and Guba, 1957) describes the interaction of elements in a social entity. The independence of the elements, their interrelationship despite the independence and the effect of individual, institutional and cultural factors on the workings of a system are the major characteristics identified.

Assuming that the system is affecting the superintendent and vice versa, the way role expectations are played out is crucial to effectiveness. Literature concerning the superintendency, for purposes of this study, were organized as demographic, role and activity and political studies.

Demographic studies provide information concerning the personal characteristics, histories and education of superintendents and they report great similarity of persons in the role. (Carlson, 1972; Griffiths, 1966; Knezevich, 1970 and Wilson, 1979). A conclusion reached by Carlson (1972) was that the superintendency was an attainable position for most educators, an open elite.

Role and activity studies were less consistent in the findings. The expectations of varied groups for behavior of a superintendent were not consistent (Behner, 1979; Gross, Mason & McEachern, 1958; Perkins, 1981). The literature on work activities is more consistent. Historical reviews reveal changes in the priorities of activities (Roller, 1935; Gilland, 1936; Griffiths, 1966; Callahan, 1962; Cronin, 1973)

with a shift toward business management tasks. Mintzberg (1974) studied five managers including a superintendent and found the superintendent to engage in a high frequency of scheduled meetings. Regarding issues, Morris (1979) reported that personnel, curriculum and instruction, budget, building and space, personal, and public relations and student affairs, in that order, were the categories being addressed. Pitner (1978) and Pitner and Ogawa (1981) reported communication to be the major activity and almost half of a superintendent's time was spent with subordinates. These studies suggest not only inconsistent findings but also a lack of consensus on how to classify the work activities themselves.

The political studies focus on superintendent - board of education or superintendent - community relations. Charter's (1954) critique of the situation concluded that professionals controlled the relationships. Iannoccone and Lutz (1970) concurred but identified situations in which communities may reassert their control over policy making. Ziegler and Jennings (1974) reported typical superintendent control while Wirt and Kirst (1974) identified factors which might increase board control. Mann (1976) identified three administrative styles and described superintendents who followed, who controlled, and who did both depending on the situation.

The empirical evidence suggests that there is significant opportunity for a superintendent to define the role

and the manner in which it will be fulfilled. This study examined how a superintendent met job responsibilities in both routine practices and in educational values held.

Methodology

The study was an eight week field study. The superintendent was observed for ten days. The superintendent, central office administrators and staff, building administrators, classroom teachers, board of education members, advisory committee members, parents active in the schools and political figures were interviewed. Documents related to goals, finance, budget, special issues, routine communications and board meetings were analysed.

The purpose of these methods was to identify those practices consistently used by the superintendent in role fulfillment and by such identification discover the values which guided them.

Data Source

The study required a site where instructional decision making involved the superintendent actively. A nominating panel of twenty persons representing the S.E.A., leaders of state wide professional groups and chairpersons of departments of educational administration in state universities was developed. Five superintendents in the state were nominated by two or more members of each of the three groups.

The five responded to a telephone interview exploring role priorities they held. The one receiving the most nominations was selected for study. He had been the superintendent of a six thousand student suburban district for seventeen years.

Results

The data were classified into the five categories of superintendent responsibility of Goal Setting and Attainment, Planning, Administration of Routine Operations, Resource Acquisition and Communication. There were unique practices in each but many practices crossed all categories.

Insert Table 1 about here

Through preparation, clear delegation, flexibility of process but not goals, teaming and frequent and extensive communication were consistently practiced by the superintendent and to a high degree by other administrators in the district. Of equal, if not greater, importance than the consistency of practices was the consistency of educational goals which had existed during his seventeen year leadership. There were four clear educational goals: individualized quality learning, racial and sex equity and maximum programming for exceptional children. The history of this superintendent revealed that he brought three of these goals

to the position and acquired the fourth, sex equity, during his tenure. The goals were pursued without compromise although plans were developed in incremental steps and modified as needed.

Conclusions

This study is limited by the limitations inherent in field study methodology. Generalizability will not be known until further studies on the topic of educational leadership of a superintendent are conducted and the relationship between practices, goals, values and leadership are more fully understood. Given these limitations, the results suggest these conclusions.

The superintendent held the instructional program to be the highest priority of the system and decisions were assessed as to whether they enhanced or threatened it. Principals knew they could not hire a coach who wasn't the best teacher available. Such a priority may seem so obvious as to be unremarkable but Griffiths (1966), Callahan (1972) and McLaughlin (1977) reported little evidence of this priority in the superintendents studied. Pressures for efficiency, economy and expediency can challenge this value.

A norm of equity in personal relationships and instructional decisions was evident. Administration and staff expressed understanding of the expectation that students should

be provided what was needed for successful learning. They also spoke of the pride they had in the high equity standard of their system. Related to this was the widespread sense of ownership of the programs in the system. Practices of delegation, teaming, flexibility of process and incremental planning with extensive communication were used to achieve this for the superintendent held that quality implementation required widespread ownership.

A fourth value held was the need to retain a high level of local control. Relationships with legislators, S.E.A. officials and local politicians were maintained in a manner which allowed the superintendent to influence the decisional process, anticipate trends and offer opportunities for piloting ideas which resulted in maintaining great autonomy. Examples of his efforts to retain local autonomy were in the initiatives he took to deal with racial balancing, sex equity and competency based education.

The fifth value disclosed was his belief that the quality of a decision is improved if there has been free and honest disclosure among interested parties. The communication activities, incremental planning, learning and flexibility shown in response to input were practices which increased shared decision making and supported the value.

The final and perhaps most important conclusion of the study was the widespread adoption of the superintendent's values and practices by the district administration (See

Table 1). If, in fact, district administrators adopt the practices they believe to be valued by a superintendent, the impact potential of a superintendent is enormous on the experience had by all parties in the system, staff, parents and most importantly, children.

Implications

There are several important implications for further research on the role of the superintendent. Field studies of other superintendents seen by other professionals as strong program leaders would help us to understand the relationship between practices and values. Additional study which addresses both the leader's personal characteristics and organizational factors of the school system is needed. If the superintendent can have such shaping influence on the educational programs what practices need to be further studied?

Boards of Education may need to re-examine the established criteria and procedures used in evaluating and hiring superintendents. If the dichotomy is false and superintendents can be both effective resource managers and educational leaders, boards need training in how to identify effective program leadership. Clarity of values and knowledge of practices likely to lead to value implementation seem essential.

Training programs in institutions and by professional

organizations may need to be changed or modified. The heavy emphasis on management aspects of the role may now have to be balanced with courses and activities which will bring about personal professional value clarification and skill in practices needed for effective human relations.

Individuals currently or aspiring to become superintendents may need to re-examine their definition of the role if they want to experience the full potential of this leadership position.

The findings of this study suggest that school systems need not be rudderless ships tossed about by the waves of fads and momentary pressures but in fact can be piloted by leaders who are able to guide them in a manner which permits consistent and steady progress toward educational program pursuits.

Table 1

Summary of routine practices to meet role responsibilities

Role Responsibility	Practices Used by the Superintendent	Use of Practices by Other Administrators
Goal Setting and Attainment	1. Agreed upon goals not negotiable 2. Negotiable processes 3. Thorough preparation 4. Extensive communication 5. Acquisition of needed resources	1. Typically practical 2. Typically practical 3. Typically practiced by Central Office Administrators, individual evidence in buildings 4. Typically practiced 5. Typically practiced by Central Office Administrators
Planning	1. Thoroughness of preparation 2. Flexibility of options 3. Delegation 4. Meeting training needs 5. Consideration of future trends	1. Typically practiced, by central office administrators, individual evidence in buildings 2. Respected but difficulty in practicing 3. Typically practiced by central office administrators, individual evidence in buildings 4. Typically practiced by central office administrators, individual evidence in buildings 5. Respected but difficulty in practicing
Administration of Routine Operations	1. Delegation 2. Teaming 3. Flexibility of processes 4. Centralized control over major issues	1. Typically practiced by central office administrators, individual evidence in buildings 2. Practiced and conscious training to increase it conducted 3. Typically practiced 4. In transition to achieve some decentralization

Table 1 (Continued)

Role Responsibility	Practices Used by the Superintendent	Use of Practices by Other Administrators
Resource Acquisition	A. State Level 1. Active with legislators 2. Active with State Department of Education Personnel 3. Active in State Professional Educational Organizations B. Local Level 1. Extensive communication practices 2. Active participation in local educational and community events	A. 1. Not practiced 2. Typically practiced by Central Office Administrators, individual evidence in buildings 3. Typically practiced B. 1. Typically practiced 2. Not typically practiced
Communication Practices	1. Full and honest disclosure 2. Wide dissemination 3. Frequent incremental updates 4. Maintenance of channels of communication	1. Typically practiced 2. Typically practiced 3. Typically practiced 4. Respected but difficulty in practicing

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